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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000383

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SUBJECT: NEW AZERBAIJANI YOUTH MINISTER A RARE BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Classified By: DCM Jason P. Hyland for Reasons 1.4 B and D.

¶1. (SBU) Recently appointed Minister of Youth and Sports Azad Rahimov told the Ambassador March 6 that he was eager to engage on youth development issues. An affluent entrepreneur in his early forties, Rahimov said he worked closely with several of Azerbaijan's current leaders, including President Aliyev, while an active member of the Communist Youth Movement (KOMSOMOL) in the early 1990s. He argued that youth unemployment would be foremost among his concerns, since unemployment feeds social angst, and contributed to rising youth interest in political Islam. Fluent in English, Rahimov spoke excitedly about his once missed opportunity as a student to travel to the US, and welcomed USG engagement on youth problems. End Summary.

UNEMPLOYMENT, ISLAM AMONG RAHIMOV'S CONCERNs

¶12. (SBU) Rahimov, an energetic businessman in his early forties who owns and operates a Baku-based designer furniture label (ItalDesigns) told the Ambassador March 8 that he was eager to delve into youth development issues. Rahimov said his initial look at youth issues led him to conclude that high youth unemployment, the role of Islam, and drug use would be among his priorities. Rahimov argued that youth unemployment was a particular focal point of concern because it, more than other issues, impacted young people's outlook on society and confidence in the future, and in the government. Political Islam, he added, was also more attractive to the destitute and the unemployed. Rahimov complained that Azerbaijan did not have enough qualified teachers, which regrettably had led some parents to send their children to religious schools (maddrassas) to get an education. In his view, maddrassas are little more than propaganda centers where education focused on advancing national ideologies of foreign governments such as Iran instead of teaching young people about Azerbaijan.

¶13. (SBU) Rahimov also said that drugs were a serious problem within the youth population. He remarked that recently, residents across the street from the Ministry told him that young people in their apartment block were leaving used needles around the complex. Rahimov said he planned to work more closely with the police to address the drug problem. Rahimov also stressed that he planned to reach out to the new Parliament to get parliamentarians engaged on youth problems since there now ten young MPs ready and willing to work with him. Rahimov also hopes to use the Ministry's resources to build new swimming pools and local tennis courts in the coming months.

AN AMERICAN-STYLE ENTREPRENEUR WITH A SOVIET YOUTH BACKGROUND

¶4. (SBU) Describing himself as a former youth leader in the early 1990s, Rahimov said that he served in the Soviet Union's Young Communist Movement (KOMSOMOL) until the group ceased activities in 1993. While participating in KOMSOMOL Rahimov noted that he met many of Azerbaijan's future leaders, including President Aliyev, the local chief executive of the Sabail district in Baku, and recently elected member of parliament Sabir Hajiyev.

¶5. (SBU) A fluent English speaker, Rahimov told Ambassador that he was once scheduled to travel to the US on a youth leadership program only to have it canceled at the last minute, an experience he regrets having missed. Rahimov asked the Ambassador for USG advice and assistance in addressing youth development. He noted that the U.S. did not have a ministry for youth or sports and asked how we carried out national youth development programs absent governmental direction. The Ambassador explained the central role of local communities in organizing programs such as Little League. The Ambassador also briefed Rahimov on the USG's support for youth development in Azerbaijan highlighting the role of PD's very successful alumni association of Azerbaijani students returning from US study programs.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Although it is premature to pass judgment on Aliyev's selection of Rahimov, our initial impressions are that Rahimov is genuinely excited about engaging Azerbaijan's youth. An intelligent interlocutor, he was overtly nervous and eager to make a good impression on the Ambassador. Rahimov invited USG advice and support on youth development issues and we will take him at his word to engage the

BAKU 00000383 002 OF 002

ministry in the coming months, beginning with his offer to address PD's Azerbaijani Alumni Association of students returning from participation in US study programs.

HARNISH